

Interview with
Vinciane Despret

Dwelling like a Bird

[Habiter en oiseau]

This interview was carried out by AOC
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Vinciane Despret, Habiter en oiseau
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Your book comes at a time when the reappraisal of work is becoming unavoidable. What was your starting point?

There were many starting points, but also there was that one morning when I was deeply moved to hear a blackbird singing. Not only because the song was beautiful, but also because it seemed to set off a very intense emotional reaction in me, as if something mattered to this blackbird in a way that I have rarely felt anything to matter. This experience felt all the more beautiful and surprising because the feeling crossed specific barriers. I wanted to make something out of what had happened. So I chose two out of all the possible paths: investigate into what mattered so much to that blackbird – his territory was making him sing – and figure out how others might have been touched by this feeling of importance – the answers for which I would find among the ornithologists. Then I was given the opportunity to observe the political, cultural and social experiment of commons, the act of “making common”, such as the forms of collective living invented in the ZAD [“Zone to Defend”, a French ecological and agricultural occupation movement against development projects], community gardens, some cultural spaces. Not simply “common goods”, they constitute entirely new ways of inhabiting environments and things. Might we look to the birds to imagine other practices, other forms of belonging and inhabiting that don’t rely on property?

What was your writing process?

My first step, while researching the history of the concept of territory from a bird's perspective, was to make sure that something interesting was actually happening here, that ornithologists had indeed been struck by this extraordinary behaviour and that it had spurred them to reflect. My suspicions were quickly confirmed: I met enthralled, curious and imaginative scientists, with a wealth of theories and fascinating hypotheses. I tried to convey as faithfully as possible what they were doing, especially through the lively stories of birds, and the just as lively stories of the researchers who study them. I then sought to keep alive what had so touched me in the blackbird's song: its rhythm and musicality, its beautiful inventiveness, and above all the deeply dialogical aspect of its songs and behaviours. This explains the structure of the book, which follows a musical assemblage of movements, of varied rhythms and counterpoints. The main chapters are thus almost entirely devoted to birds, and the counterpoints answer them, offer dialogue from other perspectives, with differing affects.

Working in the social sciences also means participating in debates in which your role as a researcher is to challenge prejudice. What is a major misconception that you would like to see challenged?

I wouldn't define work in the social sciences as a criticism of stereotypes – that would be playing into the old opposition between science and opinion – but rather as an effort of imagination. Often, stereotypes are recognisable by their tendency to generalise, and their lack of concern for real situations. It's therefore more about "gestures", invitations to consider what has been neglected or obfuscated, using investigations to add to the picture and complicate generalising ideas. Isabelle Stengers calls this "adventurous empirism".